

But It's You, I Can't Replace by Giulss

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Summary: Basically, what happens between Mike and El after the Gate's closing. A "sentimental journey", made of sweetness, a bit of misunderstandings and funny moments.

1. Prologue

The first thing he remembered of that night is the light.

The bright, sparkly, yellow light that had come from just outside the window, from the Byers' courtyard.

Then, he remembered the bang and the following smash and the hundreds of pieces of glass that were suddenly scattered across the floor.

There was also something else on the floor: one of those creepy Demogorgons- "it's Demo-dogs" he can hear Dustin's echo inside his head- was resting, liveless, just a few steps away from his feet.

And after that, it happened: it was fast, still it seemed to Mike that the whole world and the time itself had stopped.

And he didn't mind, if he had to be honest.

Because nothing else really mattered, when the girl he had missed like crazy in the last year was right there, in front of him and everybody else, standing just in front of the door, with tearful eyes.

That's the thing he actually liked to remember the most: that scary, completely messed up, but still perfect moment in which he had held her once again, in his arms, not really wanting to let her go ever again.

In that moment, with El's hands around his shoulders and her soft hair under his chin, Mike felt like he had just started to breath again. To breath again after 353 days of pure agony.

He was literally alive again, alive again after the night that had probably the longest of his entire life: Will was finally freed, the Gate has been closed and everybody was just fine.

Eleven was fine too.

Now, the night was coming to an end and some shy rays of sunshine were starting to appear over the horizon.

The gang was still at the Byers' and everyone was trying to get some rest after all that just happened.

Mike was sitting outside, on the steps of the front porch, with Eleven's head resting on his shoulder, his right arm surrounding her waist.

"I'm so happy that you're here, El. That you're home."

"I am too."

They both giggled, having a sort of sweet dejavu: so many things had

changed in the last year.

Actually, they had changed a lot, in that last year: they were both taller, thinner and with a different light in their eyes.

Now, Mike was a pretty handsome teenager and so was El, that was still resting on his shoulder, not having the strenght nor the courage to separate from him.

"I've missed you so much. Every day, Mike."

Mike could distinctly feel his heart melting and he couldn't stop the little tears that came right after those words.

"I've missed you too, El, more than I can even say." He took a deep breath and rubbed her arm gently.

"You know, there were some days in which all I wanted to do was lying in the basement and just ... I don't know ... I think I kind of tried to pretend that you were still there."

El raised her head up, now looking him straight in the eyes, and said:

"Mike, I am so sorry. I heard you. I saw you in my mind and I... I wasn't there, I ..."

"Stop, stop, El. Listen to me: this is not your fault, okay? You don't even have to think that. You've been amazing, everyone's okay and safe and you're here now. With me."

The last two words was merely audible, but that was enough to have El smile so widely that Mike would have screamed that for the rest of his life.

2. November Again

It was definitely November again.

The air was starting to smell like snow and hot chocolate and the now pale Sun just couldn't do very much against the newborn frost on the sidewalks.

Mike used to love that time of the year, just melting in the sweet sensations of silence, warm blankets and peace.

But that year, it was definitely different.

It was November the 10th, 1984: just a week before, the gate had been closed and now everyone was just trying to get back to their normal lives.

Will was still recovering after all he had been through, so he was sleeping most of the time, with Joyce always staring by his side and holding his hand.

Lucas and Max were actually hanging out a lot, now that Billy had been pushed out of the way, and they had spent several hours at the arcade, secretly holding their hands under the tables, while Dustin was continuing to accept Steve's advices, in between the nougats, that were still one of his passions, in spite of all that'd happened.

And Mike ... well, Mike had been staring at the window, mostly. After the night of the closure, he hadn't been able to see El yet.

After the night of the closure, he hadn't been able to see El yet.

The morning after the end of that nightmare, he'd held her so tight she probably could hardly breath, but he couldn't help himself.

"We will see very soon, I promise Mike."

The sound of her shaky voice'd hit him deeply inside and, suddendly, he had felt the urge to cry his heart out: he didn't want to leave her again, he couldn't.

Mike'd looked her right in the eyes, findin' out they wee just as watery as his ones.

And in that moment he'd realized that.

He had realized why every second without her had felt like a dive in the darkness, in the last year.

Or, maybe, he'd already known what that was, but it was just too big to let out.

"El, I ..."

"What, Mike?" she had hasked him, gently stroking his left

cheekbone.

Mike'd taken the deepest of breaths and he was starting to talk again, but then his eyes had fallen upon Hopper, who was waiting for "his girl", to come back home and figure their situation out, and, so, he'd decided to keep that thought for himself, waiting for the perfect moment to say it to that amazing girl that was still holding him.

"Mike?" her voice had just taken him back to reality.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I was just saying that I promise that too. We won't be apart for so long ever again."

She had smiled, squeezing his arm before going outside the Byers' house, right to Hopper's car.

"See you soon, Kiddo." Hopper had said that to him, before disappearing in the wood.

They had shared a look that meant a lot of things: *"I won't take her away from you, Wheeler, i swear."*

"Please, just trust me."

A thunder's bang just woke Mike up from the confusion of his thoughts and he decided to get up from his bed for some eggos.

He'd started to eat them way more often, just to feel another sort of 'connection' with El.

He'd felt so light and sheltered when he'd seen her eating one of 'em for breakfast, before leaving Will's house.

It'd felt like nothing had changed: just like there were just the two of them in the basement, laughing together.

All he'd wanted to do in that moment was keeping her between his arms and kissing her, to taste her soft lips and to convince himself she was actually back.

Mike started to eat the warm waffle, trying to relax for just one moment and remembering how El's lips tasted just like that, sugary and soft.

"Friends don't lie."

"Well, I ... I was thinking ... I don't know ... Maybe we can go to the snowball together."

"Snowball?"

For the second time that day, a sudden noise interrupted the stream of his memories: someone was knocking at the door.

Mike was home alone, so he just thought that it was his mother

coming back from the grocery store.

He was wrong.

He opened the front door and there was Hopper, right there, staring in front of him.

"Hello, kiddo."

3. A men's talk

Hello everyone!

First of all, I wanted to say thank you so, so much for your support, you guys are amazing.

Then, I would like to apologize for my English, I know that I'm probably making many mistakes, but it's not my first language, 'cause I'm italian and I'm just trying to do my best while writing this story.

Hope you guys will like the chapter 3

Giulss

"Hello, kiddo."

Hopper was staring at him, with a light smile on his face, that actually made him look so much younger.

Mike thought to himself that was probably the first time he was seeing the Chief with an actual smile.

He smiled back, even if it probably looked more like a smirk: he still didn't have completely accepted the fact that he'd been hiding El for almost a year, in that cabin in the woods.

He was not 'mad', not really: he knew that Hopper had taken good care of her and that all he was trying to do was protecting her.

But it couldn't help himself. It'd been the worst year of his whole life, 353 days of despair and bitterness and, even if now he was kind of understanding what'd led him to not say anything to him neither, his instinct was making him wary towards him, in some way.

"Goodmorning, Sir."

Mike let the older man came inside of his house and politely offered him some orange juice.

There was an awkward silence between them and the air in the Wheeler's living room was starting to get heavy.

Mike was afraid to ask him which was the reason that'd led him to his house.

It has to be about El, there wax no doubt about it.

Maybe she was in even worst dangers than before.

Maybe she was having trouble recovering after the closure of the Gate.

Maybe he wouldn't be able to see her again.

That last thought hit him like a knife right in his chest.

"What about your parents, Wheeler?"

Hopper's voice seemed to come from miles and miles away, to Mike perspection.

"Kid?"

"Oh, I'm ... I'm sorry, what?"

"Your parents. Are they home?"

"Oh, no no, I'm alone. Dad's away for some days for work, mom's at the grocery with Holly and Nancy is at Will's house."

"I see. Well, good for you, 'cause I need to talk to you 'bout something that's very important and, most of all, it has to stay private."

"What's that?"

"Have you understand, kid? I said private and I mean that. It's just between you, me and El."

When he heard the sound of her name, Mike immediately sat up straighter on the couch, giving Hopper the most serious look the Chief had ever seen.

"I know what you mean. I know it's dangerous and everything. I was there when everything happened, I've been in those creepy labs. I think you know you can trust me."

"Hey, hey, hey, calm down, Wheeler. I was just making things clear. Just to make sure that you know that the "private thing" involves your friends too. They don't have to know."

"i know that. I promise." Mike said.

"Okay, then. First of all, she's okay. I know you probably don't trust me or my "parent skills" at all, but she's okay. She's just a bit weak, but she's going to be more than fine in a few days."

Mike let out the biggest of the sighs of relief: she was fine. She was going to be.

He suddedly felt the urge to cry again.

"Hey, it's okay!"

"Yeah, yes it's okay."

Mike inhaled deeply, before saying "Then, what did you want to tell me?"

"Look, Mike." Mike noticed that was probably the first time the Chief was referring to him using his actual name.

"That's the thing: in two weeks, I'm going to meet Doctor Owens. I'm gonna talk to him and we'll see what to do and with that I mean that we'll consider what are the dangers for El and how the general security situation is going."

Mike listened to him, not saying a single word, just torturing the arm

of the couch with his fingers.

"But, even if I think that the things are going to be way less tense than the last year, I can't risk to put her in danger. "

"So you're basically saying that I'm not allowed to see her? That we're going to stay away from each other for God knows how many months?"

"Slow down, kiddo, I've not finished yet."

Mike just wanted to scream: he felt so frustrated and tired and, God, he just wanted to see her and, most of all, to see her happy and free, without security rules to follow.

"Calm down, Mike. Of course, she will have to stay at the cabin for some time, and yes, I don't know how much it's "some time"."

Mike let out a bitter laugh, and he got up, starting to walk all over the room and trying to calm down.

"But I know that I made a lot of mistakes with her last year. And with you. And I'm sorry."

Mike stopped, looking at him again, waiting for his next words.

"So, I came here to ... well, let's just say to make a deal, okay?"

"I'm listening." Mike's tone was deadly serious.

In the next days, I'm going to analyze all the possible itineraries to get to the cabin, so we're not going to be too suspected and ..."

"Wait, I'm sorry, 'we'?"

Hopper looked at him, smiling and looking younger again.

"Yes, kid. We. Look, I'm not a crazy fan of this "love's despair" between the two of you. You're just kids and you should be way more calm about this kind of stuff.

But I know that you care about her and for sure she cares about you more than anything."

Mike could feel his breath slowing down and his face turning red.

"So ..." Mike said, attempting.

"So, this time I'm not the one that will take the two of you apart for so long."

Mike's face suddenly lit up and he felt so grateful he would have probably hugged Hopper, if that wouldn't be so awkward.

"But, and I mean that kid, you have to maintain a good behavior and never, ever break my rules. Got it?"

"Got it! I promise, I would never do that." Mike said, smiling with tearful eyes.

" Well, then. I'm going to contact you to tell you when you can come to the cabin. And, I'm the one that is supposed to pick you up. I don't

want you to just wander through the woods with your bike, okay?"

"Yeah, Sir, sure."

"Oh, so i'm 'sir' now?"

Mike's cheeks became even redder, if possible.

Hopper went to the window, starting to light up his cigarette.

"Can I ask you something?"

Mike'd been thinking about it a lot, actually.

"What'up, kid?"

"Well ... I mean ... How did you find her?"

"What?"

"I mean." Mike stopped for a second "Where did you find her? Where was her?"

The Chief looked outside the window for a long moment, before answering.

"It was a few weeks after Christmas. I'd been hiding some food in a concealed box in the wood for her and, one day, she just showed up at the right moment I guess.

She was freezing and she was just so scared. She looked so fragile."

He let out a sigh and Mike shivered.

"I took her to the cabin: it was my granfather's one. We spent the first three weeks just cleaning up and arranging everything.

We organized her room and all the other spaces: you know, she was so excited about having her own personal space, that was the first time of her life"

Mike chuckled and then sighed. He was definitely about to cry now, remembering how grateful she'd looked one year before, when he had just built that little fort for her and had gave her food and clean clothes.

"Then we started to establish the main three rules, for her security and we also started to read some books, you know, to improve her vocabulary."

"She's talking so much more and better now."

Hopper smirked and Mike smirked back, a tear falling down his cheek.

"She's going to be fine. We'll take care of her, right kid?"

Hopper stretched out his hand and Mike took it in his own.

"Promise."

They both smiled.

4. I just can't

A week had passed since that meeting at the Wheeler's and Mike was getting more anxious everyday.

He hadn't seen Hopper since then and he was starting to get worried sick.

Was El okay? Was her in danger? Why on Earth was the Chief not contacting him?

He didn't know: all he knew was that he was desperate to see her again.

He couldn't do pretty much nothing but thinking about her every minute.

And that day, it was just the same.

The five of them were in class, waiting for the biology lesson to start. Dustin was completely into one of those books about reptiles he'd borrowed from the public library when he'd first found Dart: even after all they'd been through and the whole "demo-dogs" mess, he was still firmly convinced that he would be able to take some scientific advantages from the whole thing.

Will had just got back to school: it was his second day and it seemed like he was doing pretty well, after all.

Then, there were Lucas and Max, that were sitting close to each other as always and were actually staring at Mike, who hadn't said a single word that morning yet and was just staring at the wall in front of him.

"Mike, seriously, it seems like you have something in your pants for how much your leg is shaking, would you please stop?" Lucas said that while putting one hand on Mike's shoulder.

"Oh, I'm sorry, what?"

"Mike, come on, she's okay. She's safe, you know that."

"Of course she is."-Said Will, with a light smile -"And I'm sure that she's going to join all of us very soon, Mike. I know that."

Dustin smiled too and said "Yes, and then we're going all in the basement like the good old days and ev-"

"Please guys just stop." Mike said, with a barely audible whisper.

They were all looking at him now and he needed to take a deep breath.

"Thank you, guys. I mean it, thank you. But please don't ask me to stay calm, I hate it. I can't stay calm."

I know that it's probably stupid, i get it, but I just can't help thinking that something terrible could happen to her every minute and that I can't protect her myself right now and I hate that."

The four guys kept looking at him, with a concerned look in their eyes and without saying a word.

"You probably cannot understand. I'm sorry guys, really."

"Goodmorning, everyone." Mr Clarke's voice caught their attention and they all went to sit straight in their chairs.

"See you tomorrow, Mike."

"I guess."

Mike ran away, riding his back as fast as he could: he didn't want to start that kind of conversation with his friends again.

Lucas, Mike, Dustin and Will looked at him, until he disappeared from their sight.

"I'm very worried about him. I've never seen him so restless and pensive." Said Lucas.

The others just sighed, nodding.

About ten minutes after, Mike was approaching his house's garden, mentally preparing himself for his mother's usual question.

He had memorized them so far: "How was your school day?" "What's wrong, Michael?" "Are you sure you're okay?" "You can talk to me about everything, you know that?"

They were always in this same order, like an exhausting ritual.

He was starting to walk toward the front porch, when he noticed a car standing just in front of him, beside the sidewalk.

That was a very familiar car, actually.

And the smiling, bearded face that was looking at him through the window was even more familiar.

"Guess what, kid?"

Hopper had been driving for about half an hour now, while Mike'd been staring at the cloudy sky outside the window.

They were both quiet, minds busy with dozens of different thoughts.

Mike just couldn't believe that: it was finally happening, he was about to see El again.

That simple thought was enough to give him chills and sweaty hands.

"I can take you to see her today, but you have to be careful. Meet me at 4 p.m right down Halbour Street, okay?"

That was all Hopper had said to him.

Mike'd said to his mom that he was going to visit Will and that he was probably going to stay there for dinner.

She hadn't made any protests: she was probably just very happy to see his son with a smile on his face again.

They'd just turned right after that big oak tree Hopper was talking about the night of the Gate's closing: they were almost there